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## States stress benefits of pre-kindergarten programs

**ARLINGTON, Virginia (AP)** -- Yasmine Carrizo has trouble pinpointing exactly what she likes best about pre-kindergarten at Carlin Springs Elementary.

"I like the toys, and playing house, and book time, and sleep-over (nap) time," the wide-eyed 4-year-old says one morning as she colors with markers at a table just her size.

Barely taking a breath, Yasmine starts to list additional favorites when she gets a cue from her teacher. "Gotta go," she tells a visitor, dashing off with pigtails bobbing to join her friends at the classroom door. "It's library time!"

It's not hard to find such enthusiasm at the cheerful school, one of several hundred in Virginia that offer state-funded preschool to low-income 4-year-olds.

Nationwide, children typically enter school at around age 5, when they're ready for kindergarten. But research highlighting the importance of early learning is prompting more and more states to add pre-kindergarten programs.

"Virtually every state has a very strong movement toward doing a better job with pre-k," said Arthur Rolnick, a senior vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and part of a group of business leaders calling for giving low-income kids earlier access to public school.

A report being released Wednesday finds states spent at least \$3.3 billion last year on pre-kindergarten. That doesn't include money from federal and local governments, which contribute to the state programs. The state funding is up from \$2.8 billion in 2005, according to the report by the National Institute for Early Education Research at New Jersey's Rutgers University.

In all, nearly 1 million children, or 20 percent of the country's 4-year-olds, were in state pre-kindergarten last year -- up from 17 percent the previous year, the report found.

About two-thirds of 4-year-olds are in private preschool or child-care programs or at home, the study said.

About one in 10 is in Head Start, the federal pre-kindergarten program for poor children, the report said. The \$6.8 billion Head Start program covers only about half of all eligible children. About 7 percent of the nation's 3-year-olds also participate in Head Start.

As in Virginia, most state-funded programs are aimed at poor children. However, Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma offer pre-k to all 4-year-olds. Other states are considering going that route.

Illinois Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich won approval to extend preschool to all 3- and 4-year-olds by 2011 and is pushing for the money to do it.

The federal No Child Left Behind education law probably has something to do with the trend, says Steven Barnett, who wrote the report

on state pre-k spending.

One of that law's goals is to eliminate achievement gaps between low-income and wealthier students, but studies show the gap begins before children enter school.

"Schools are quite aware if we start off behind ... we will have a very difficult time making this up by the time we're responsible for the test scores," Barnett said.

Rolnick and Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman of the University of Chicago have been speaking out on the fiscal benefits of paying for pre-k. They say getting kids off to a solid start is much cheaper than giving them remedial education later.

Pre-k advocates point to research including:

- An ongoing study dating to the 1960s in Ypsilanti, Michigan, in which some children were randomly assigned to attend a high-quality preschool and some were not. Those who went were more likely to graduate from high school, had higher earnings and were less likely to be arrested.
- A study of children who were randomly selected for an early learning program in North Carolina that began in the 1970s, which found participants did better in reading and math and were less likely to be left back later.
- A 2003 Georgetown University examination of the Oklahoma preschool program, which found children in pre-k had improved cognitive and language skills.

The research generally shows low-income students get more out of pre-k than higher-income children.

"To me, the most compelling rationale for it is the inequity data," said Sharon Lynn Kagan, associate dean for policy at Columbia University's Teachers College. "My hope would be that everybody would have it. Short of that, I think you need to think carefully about where you invest and that indeed is what most states have done."

But those pushing for a broader approach want pre-k to become part of the structure of the U.S. school system, as it is in other industrialized countries such as France and Italy. That would mean offering it to everyone, regardless of income.

"This is a part of school reform," said Libby Doggett, executive director of Washington-based Pre-K Now, which advocates for broad access to pre-k. "If you're not going to means-test first grade, then don't means-test this."

Those pushing for pre-k for all think they will have a better chance of getting political support for a program offered to everyone.

The fight for public pre-k is an echo of one that generally started in the 1970s over access to full-day kindergarten. Back then, about 20 percent of kindergartners were in a full-day program, compared with roughly 65 percent today, according to Barnett.

The pre-k programs are a mix of part- and full-day programs. Those without full-day coverage or extended care sometimes have trouble meeting the needs of working families.

The Virginia Preschool Initiative requires teachers to work closely with parents, and the Carlin Springs teachers even visit students' homes.

For Christopher Lyon, a pre-k teacher at the northern Virginia school, such visits provide greater insight into his students' lives.

"One home visit I went on, there were six people living in a one-bedroom apartment with one plastic PVC white chair and a twin bed in the living room and a milk crate full of kind of leftover toys," Lyon said.

During a separate conversation with a student's father, Lyon realized the man couldn't write his own name.

It's unlikely Lyon's students will find themselves in that position. They are working on early reading and writing skills in their sunny classroom full of books and colorful labels that practically shout out the names of toys and art supplies that fill the room.

Lyon says he feels confident pre-kindergarten is helping his students, saying, "There is tremendous progress from everyone."

And parents who participate in the state programs express delight with them.

Barbara Brockhaus' two children attended pre-kindergarten at Wilson Elementary School in Oklahoma City, and she said the class prepared them for kindergarten, something educators say is necessary given the increasingly challenging curricula in early grades.

She also said the program is fun, which is important since pre-kindergartners are forming opinions about school. "When your kids wake up and they find out it's Saturday and they're upset -- then I think there is something really good going on at that school," she said.

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